Preparing a Battalion for Combat:

Marksmanship

Lieutenant Colonel William C. David

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the second in a series of four. The author commanded the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry), in Somalia in late-1993, and wrote the series at the encouragement of the division commander.

The first article in the series, on physical fitness and mental toughness, appeared in the May-June 1995 issue of INFANTRY; the two remaining articles, on maneuver live fire training and leadership lessons learned, will appear in subsequent issues.

Marksmanship is linked to the very essence of a light infantry battalion; it is the most fundamentally important individual combat skill for light infantrymen. When soldiers lack confidence in their buddies' ability to provide them with accurate covering fire, there is no fire and movement. And without fire and movement, the effectiveness of the scheme of maneuver also begins to disintegrate. No matter how well-conceived a plan may be, or how well it is coordinated and rehearsed, mission success depends upon solid marksmanship skills at the point of attack.

Close combat continues to be a fight that is won or lost at squad and platoon level, where the impetus for fire and movement is found in the acts of individuals. Skill in marksmanship—and the confidence in one's weapon that comes with it—is the enabling tool that overrides a soldier's natural inclination to go to ground under fire. It can transform a group of otherwise passive individuals into aggressive squads and platoons with the skill and will to win.

To win this close fight, light infantrymen must be consistently able to acquire and hit difficult targets that are partially exposed or camouflaged, stationary or moving, day or night. They must be cross-trained on all platoon weapons so that they will have the confidence to man key systems in the event of crew casualties.

Confidence in marksmanship is also the most important mental ingredient commanders can give soldiers for overcoming their personal fear in combat. In *close* combat,

where a soldier can often see his enemy, that fear is even more intense. Even if the enemy's physical form is not clearly visible, the flash of his weapon usually is, and the rounds can be heard snapping overhead.

It is very sobering to lie in the prone position with your face in the dirt and enemy fire all around. Men you've never met and will never know are trying to kill you. The future is now measured in terms of the ability to kill before being killed. For a flash, it seems strange and wrong somehow that the sum total of life's experiences should come to this.

Fear is therefore a natural reaction; it has weight that can slow or stop the sturdiest of men. But when their marksmanship is developed to a high level, soldiers gain an intangible psychological edge that keeps paralysis from taking over. It gives them the capacity to act in the face of great danger.

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For all of these reasons, when I took command of the battalion, I viewed marksmanship as one of the essential core performance areas for light infantry operations. High performance in marksmanship would always give the battalion a key tactical advantage; and once we had this advantage, it would be ours to keep. This was one area in which we could control our own fate.

Training Guidance

Every division uses weapon qualification statistics as one of its primary tools for assessing combat readiness. Without question, qualification is important, but a soldier has to master the fundamentals of marksmanship before he can qualify with an individual or crew-served weapon. Then, qualification tables will provide a consistent standard against which to evaluate performance and measure progress.

Standard weapon qualification provides the start point for the development of combat marksmanship skills. To kill efficiently and effectively in combat, however, a light infantryman has to be a better shot than the marksmanship tables require him to be.

Weapon qualification is conducted on fixed ranges with clear fields of fire, with targets that only move up and down and are usually clearly visible. Qualification isn't conducted as part of fire and movement and, except for the noise of the firing line, there are no distractions, such as indirect fires, smoke, or attack helicopters. Most often, weapons are fired from the prone position only, and qualification may not be conducted frequently enough to keep skills truly sharp.

Against many competing demands for time and resources, units sometimes tend to be overwhelmed by the crush of events. Unless they are careful, units may discover that they're spending most of their time on the range just keeping up with reportable weapon qualification requirements.

Marksmanship should be one of our major strengths, and focusing on weapon qualification alone won't develop high performance in combat marksmanship. To reach this high level, units must do more in their training.

To duplicate what the soldier will find on the battlefield, commanders must make conditions more challenging and realistic. And to provide soldiers with opportunities for steady improvement in their marksmanship skills, firing must be more frequent. These two steps will develop combat marksmanship, giving soldiers both the skill and the will to overcome their natural fear in combat and to kill a determined enemy.

Getting the Ten-Percent Difference

After assuming command and making an initial assessment, I discovered that the battalion's marksmanship was in pretty good shape. The units had achieved basic weapon proficiency across the board, and all training management standards had been met. Nevertheless, I knew this was no guarantee that we would be able to perform at peak levels in combat; like any unit, we had room for improvement. This core performance area therefore became a focus of attention.

Combat marksmanship is the area in which we sought to gain our ten-percent improvement. We wanted to hone a variety of important battlefield shooting skills to a high level. Doing this would give our soldiers the skills they needed to overcome their natural fears in combat and kill the enemy.

Any unit can make dramatic improvements in marksmanship. No hard-sell is required. Noncommissioned officers and soldiers fully understand that their survival in combat is directly tied to their ability to shoot. This is one combat skill in which they want to excel.

My personal role in this process was simple. First, I made targetry and feedback on marksmanship a priority in all collective training, whether it was force-on-force or live-fire. Second, I gave company commanders the freedom to use their initiative in conducting nonstandard marksmanship training on the range. These two fine-tune adjustments were all that was required to put a series of actions into motion to give us the ten-percent improvement we wanted.

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For all maneuver live-fire exercises, targetry was always a key item of interest to me. For live-fire exercises conducted at company level and below, it was one of the areas that required my personal approval during the company commander's pre-execution briefing. I wanted to be sure that target arrays were realistic and that they accurately depicted enemy situational

templates appropriate to the training scenario. The targets on the range had to be laid out as briefed. Problems that could be fixed were fixed on the spot.

The same rules applied to any maneuver live-fire range run by the battalion. The S-3 had to get my personal approval on the targetry plan at the concept briefing. Before execution, I walked the ground with either the S-3 or the assistant S-3 to confirm the plan and make any adjustments that might be needed. It didn't take the battalion long to figure out that I had a real interest in targetry. If they didn't have a good plan, they would be sent back to the drawing board, along with an impromptu class on the relationship between targetry and training realism.

Eventually, our targetry became more sophisticated. We gradually replaced silhouettes with target mannequins (in the style of those at the Joint Readiness Training Center), constructed within the battalion. The battalion S-4 coordinated with the Defense Reutilization and Marketing Office for expendable uniforms and equipment to make our targets and objectives as lifelike as possible. One ambitious company commander did the battalion staff one better and rigged moving dummy targets on a squad react-to-contact live-fire range.

We got started in the right direction and, after a while, momentum took over. Enhancing realism on the range became an area of constructive competition within the battalion, and the payoff was higher quality training for the soldiers.

Target hits were always counted on maneuver live-fire situational training exercises to grade marksmanship. Soldiers were allowed to see the effects of their weapons by walking over the objective as part of the after-action review. Seeing a splintered mannequin whose uniform their fire had just torn to shreds helped them appreciate the deadly power they had at their fingertips.

Without exception, all force-on-force training was conducted with the soldiers wearing MILES (multiple-integrated laser engagement system) gear. While MILES is far from perfect, it helps get soldiers accustomed to shooting at moving targets and targets above ground level. It is also the best system available for honing individual movement techniques (IMTs) under fire. Most of our live-fire exercises were also conducted with MILES, and even in these exercises, observer-controllers had the authority to score "kills" on soldiers who had failed to execute IMTs according to standard.

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The greatest advances in individual combat marksmanship training, however, resulted from creativity and ingenuity at company level and below. These efforts made marksmanship challenging and, at the same time, sustained the soldiers' enthusiasm by making training fun.

The following are a few of the techniques our units employed:

- To give soldiers practice at hitting moving targets, units constructed simple frames from 2x4s and hung plastic bottles or balloons from the cross-members. The wind alone was enough to cause movement in the targets.
- In Somalia, one company took target practice on water bottles in the ocean, allowing natural wave action to move the targets. At night, chemical lights were put inside the bottles to aid in identification, and the soldiers received immediate feedback on their hits.
- The same company ran timed squad marksmanship competitions in which each squad was issued identical loads of ammunition. Each squad trained its weapons on a vertical 4x4 post planted in the ground, the object being to determine which squad could cut its post in half the fastest. Ties were settled on the basis of the fewest rounds expended.
- Another company drilled fire teams and squads on marksmanship as part of fire and movement by creating live-fire lanes where targets were randomly changed between iterations. The fire teams or squads with the most target hits were appropriately rewarded.

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Because I wanted members of the chain of command to use imagination in seeking better ways to train, I did not standardize combat marksmanship training into a formal program. Instead, units shared information on training techniques that worked well—and those that didn't—at weekly training meetings. I saw it as a perfectly legitimate use of time and resources for platoons to go out to the range and shoot, without turning it into a standard qualification range. I didn't have to sell its importance to anyone.

It was relatively easy to get the ten-percent improvement in marksmanship. Two fine-tune adjustments did the trick:

- First, we made marksmanship a consistent priority in all collective training and established simple internal feedback mechanisms to assess our progress.
- Second, to improve individual combat marksmanship skills, I left it to the chain of command to figure out the best way to get the desired results.

Once they knew they were free to experiment, the noncommissioned officers really took over and ran the show, and the payoffs were dramatic. The soldiers developed exceptional marksmanship skills and became extremely confident with their weapons. When the battalion did conduct weapon qualification, about 75 percent of the soldiers scored Expert.

The 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, became a high-performing unit that could flat-out *shoot;* the proof of this was demonstrated in all the battalion's later combat operations in Somalia.

Payoffs in Combat

The focus on combat marksmanship enabled the battalion to deliver well-aimed, accurate fire during urban combat operations in Mogadishu. After squeezing the trigger, a soldier could see the enemy drop. If fire was received from the dark recesses of a room, that fire was soon followed by silence after a 40mm round or a burst of machinegun fire went through the window.

Soldiers discovered they had the tools to beat the enemy in his own back yard. It quickly became clear to them which side had the better force. Once a unit was in contact, the paralysis of fear never had a chance to take hold. In its place were confident soldiers, doing their jobs the way they had been trained.

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The typical Somalia National Alliance militiaman was a poor marksman. Instead of using well-aimed shots, he preferred to spray areas with automatic weapon fire. While this technique was certainly an attention-getter, our soldiers could see that it was not an effective way to kill. By contrast, most of our fighting was conducted from point-blank range out to 200 meters, and on those occasions when the enemy exposed himself for a direct shot, our soldiers got immediate feedback from their well-aimed fire.

All of this gave the soldiers exceptional confidence, which was instrumental in maintaining momentum in the attack. They were never hesitant to fire their weapons and were confident in the ability of their buddies on the right and left to deliver accurate covering fire. Squad and fire team leaders identified targets with tracers, and then the enemy was eliminated. Fire and movement worked just like the book said it would, and high performance in individual combat marksmanship made it possible.

The soldiers made each round count. From their training, they were familiar with shooting at moving and partially exposed targets from a variety of firing positions. On the basis of post-battle reports from UNOSOM (United Nations Operation in Somalia) headquarters by both the International Committee for the Red Cross and human intelligence sources, enemy casualties in each of the task force's engagements exceeded friendly casualties by factors of 10 to 20.

This helped make the ammunition-intensive nature of urban fighting less operationally restrictive. During engagements ranging from five to seven hours, our companies never ran out of ammunition. This meant we never had to conduct an ammunition resupply under fire—the importance of which cannot be overstated. The soldiers had the discipline to shoot only at targets they could clearly identify. The repetition in training had given them confidence in their ability to use well-aimed shots instead of a heavy volume of poorly aimed fire.

Because marksmanship is a core performance area and the essence of light infantry operations, this was an area in which I felt a ten-percent improvement would give us a decided edge, and combat proved that it did. All battalions, if committed to the effort, have the resources to achieve results that are just as good. Doing two simple things consistently in all training did the trick for us:

First, marksmanship was an area of constant command attention in all collective training conducted in the battalion, whether live fire or force-on-force.

Second, the companies were given the freedom to use their initiative in implementing nonstandard instructional techniques designed to improve marksmanship skills.

Marksmanship is a task in which soldiers and leaders truly want to achieve excellence; no outside help is required, and its payoff in combat cannot be overstated.

Lieutenant Colonel William C. David served as deputy chief of staff of the 10th Mountain Division after completing his assignment as commander of 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, and is now assigned to the U.S. Southern Command. He previously served in the 82d Airborne Division and the 9th Infantry Division and served as a battalion executive officer in the 101st Airborne Division during Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM. He is a 1975 graduate of the United States Military Academy and holds masters degrees from the University of Southern California and the University of South Carolina.